Postmodern Picturebooks
Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality

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Postmodern picturebooks: play, parody, and self-referentiality / edited by Lawrence R. Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo.

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CITED


There is a long and fairly disreputable (or at least contestable) tradition in Children's Studies of gauging what a culture believes about its children by looking at the way it portrays them in art. Philippe Ariès's primary methodology in his controversial yet still influential book Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life is to look at medieval representations of children's faces, bodies, and clothes; he infamously concludes that childhood didn't exist as a concept in Europe before the European Middle Ages. Eva M. Simms, in a forthcoming book, turns Ariès's notion on its head: using art but also adding in a brilliant reading of the Children's Crusade, she concludes that it wasn't a notion of childhood that was lacking, but a firm sense of adulthood with its attendant rites of passage that kept European peoples from making solid distinctions between childhood and maturity. She points to the importance of a journey away from home, and the emergence of self-reflexive art; as well as to portraits that place age and youth in contradiction with one another, as her source texts.

Anne Higonnet, in Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood, offers more philosophically charged conclusions about the attitudes toward childhood one can glean from pictures of children, arguing that critical study of the representations of children over the centuries reveals to us a paradigm shift in the way we view childhood and our relation to it. She mounts an interdisciplinary argument that our vision of childhood has moved from a nostalgic notion of the Romantic, innocent child who acts as a talisman or fetish to ward off our fears regarding death, decay, and loss, to a more disturbing incarnation of the child as a preternaturally knowing fetish of a different kind, one that exposes rather than protects us from the knowledge of sexuality, exploitation, vulnerability, and abuse. I'd like to continue in this more philosophical vein, adopting and adapting the (dubious?) methodology of looking at representations of and for children in order to draw some conclusions about what we believe about the self in postmodern society. Unlike these historians and critics, however, I won't be focusing on the pictures that hang in galleries or turn up in greeting card racks, but at the texts and images that children themselves are more likely to interact with—contemporary, specifically postmodern, picturebooks.
I want to suggest that children's interactions with postmodern picturebooks provide a key entry point into the project of self-fashioning in contemporary society. My argument rests on the premise that children's texts, in their many forms, provide children with the cultural and visual literacies and narrative patterns that allow them to craft identities that will be functional and recognizable in their society; they are an important element in the scaffolding on which children build coherent and effective selves. This premise, of course, is based on an ideology informed by postmodern critiques of Romantic and modernist beliefs that the self is an inner potentiality that we grow into (as modernists would have it) or out of (as per the Romantics), and that we live authentically or inauthentically. Postmodernism challenges the very possibility of authenticity by insisting on the self as constructed—a fragmented play of surfaces where any sense of coherence or integration is illusory at best, a violent repression at worst. Hence representations and relationships of all kinds are vastly important in the process of self-construction, and the stories that are available for children at any given time are the material out of which they fashion an identity and formulate an aesthetics and ethics of the self. While I find much to think about and indeed value in that challenge, I believe that such postmodern critiques have largely exhausted themselves because they don't fully account for the lived reality of children. That is, while I acknowledge that much of our reality is socially constructed, I also think that children's desire for internal integrity and coherence is not in fact based on a storied illusion fomented by culture, but on their experience of their own bodies. Likewise, their desire for structure and meaning that expands beyond the situated, local experiences that their experience affords them comes from their positioning within a community of others, and within a system of signs—language and image—that point to a reality outside themselves. Hence I find that, like Eliza Dresang in this present volume, I need a 'beyond' of postmodernism. Rather than locate my argument in contingent digital age principles as she does, however, I want to explore the relationship of postmodern picturebooks to what psychologist Paul Vitz has termed the "transmodern" self. As I will explain in more depth later, the notion of the transmodern attempts to incorporate embodied experience within social and cultural formations; it acts as an important synthesis and corrective to starker versions of the self in modernist and postmodernist thought. Postmodern picturebook authors and illustrators operate at the interstices of these conceptual frameworks, using the playful but philosophically bleak techniques of postmodernism to transform the optimistic but pragmatically untenable dictates of modernism into a vision of the transmodern self.

FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN

I want to start with a scandalously selective overview of the history of the modern self and its postmodern discontents. As Ariès, Simms, and Higonnet point out, portraiture is an important indicator of the ideology of a period, especially as it reveals how a culture literally sees the individual. The earliest examples of figure drawing that we know were concerned with depictions of action, relationships, and ideas rather than capturing the distinctive features of individuals. Egyptian, Roman, and Greek funerary portraits from as early as 3100 BCE did depict recognizable individuals, but they were still concerned with creating a montage effect by connecting the face of a person with the authority of his or her position. During the medieval period in Europe, most portraits tended to lose the sense of the individual altogether in favor of a stylized representation of a person's occupation or social or religious position, relying on conventional imagery of, for instance, a scholar at his desk, Madonna and child, or a king or religious leader dispensing authoritative pronouncements. As it broke free from these conventional images into the recognizable realistic depictions of patrons and important political personages, postmedieval portraiture suggests the emergence and growing importance of the sense of an individual self; historians of the self concur that the notion of the modern individual self emerged during the Renaissance and Reformation, abetted by the growth of humanistic philosophies, an emphasis on the moral accountability of individuals, and the development of the printing press, which enabled the development of a widespread literacy practiced alone in one's room, encouraging the tendency toward introspection and self-reflexivity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, painterly representations were democratized, as it were, as painters turned their attention not only to ordinary people, but to children as well. Though the motivation for child portraiture was then, as it is now, at least in part to preserve a sense of an individual child's appearance, the poses, attitudes, and dress adopted for these portraits were stylized into ideal representations of childhood, rather than any particular child's habits or preferences. As Higonnet points out, portraits of children were designed to capture the essence of an idea of innocence. Even in representations that were decidedly coy, there is a sense that the child is free of blemish and the taint of adult sensibilities, worries, and preoccupations. The ideas and values of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had taken firm hold in the public imagination, positing children as blank slates, a breed apart from their elders, who were responsible for bringing them up in such a way as to ensure that they remained unsullied by the baser imaginings that would prevent them from realizing Enlightenment ideals of moral and intellectual autonomy, reason and rationality, and a strong sense of independence and free will. In children the self is in potential; modernist faith is in progress and development—the progress and development of the individual, and the progress and development of the species. Today, we generally accept these modernist signifiers—inddependence, freedom, autonomy, reason, self-actualization—as goals the human self is tending toward or striving to achieve; the path is linear, and goes uphill through...
predetermined stages from child to adult. The upward trajectory of this path was challenged by the Romantics, of course, who saw these same signifiers as our birthright rather than our achievements, and experienced growing up as a loss of these things rather than their fulfillment, but the absolute rightness of these values remained (and remains, as we shall see) largely unchallenged until a critique calling itself postmodern emerged.

Modernist picturebooks affirm these values and this sense of self in both their form and their substance. Throughout his critical oeuvre, American art theorist Clement Greenberg talks about modernist artistic practice in ways that are analogous to the ways we have just been discussing the self, by stressing art's essential autonomy. Art in modernism is a subject, form, and practice of and for itself; at its maturity, it takes nothing from nor owes anything to the world around it. Consider in this context The Story of Ferdinand. Under his cork tree, Ferdinand is accountable to no one. He thinks and decides for himself what is right for him, and exercises his free will despite cultural expectations, maternal worries, and the potential threat of being poked with a sharp stick. The artistic form of the work is quite divorced from representation; the bulls may look like bulls and the matador like a matador, but only insofar as a black line drawing on a white background can resemble the thing it represents. Indeed, Lawson's depiction of the cork tree playfully reminds us of his autonomy from representation. Likewise, Harold with his purple crayon is an iconic representation of the self in modernist theory—a diminutive Descartes, his free will is such that he can create and destroy his world at his own pleasure. Max with his wild things, Peter playing alone on his snowy day, Curious George getting up to one mischief or another—each representation is of a self-contained individual in a self-sustaining narrative world.

The notion of a modernist self with its optimistic (if rather lonely) teleology has undergone a radical critique, however, with the advent of postmodernity. Generally speaking, we have been staging the postmodern critique since the world wars, the horror of which caused us to lose faith in the modernist optimism regarding progress and development. Artistically speaking, however, the postmodern critique did not come to the cultural mainstream until the late 1960s, when people started to really challenge the basis of modernist thought. Clearly, reason, autonomy, independence, and free will do not lead us to seek the good as we had previously assumed they would—we are not like Ferdinand after all, it would seem—or does rationality ensure even a utilitarian ethics that would prevent us trying to destroy ourselves; our wild things do not always respond to flashing specters and the promise of comfort and a hot dinner. On the one hand, maybe these modernist values would point us in the right direction if it were possible to actually achieve them, which it apparently is not; on the other hand, perhaps the goals themselves are inherently flawed, steeped as they are in a framework that foregrounds and privileges the autonomy and free will of the individual. Mothers and children know there is no such thing as autonomy; oppressed peoples understand with their bodies the limitations of a genuinely free will. The self does not grow like a tree, developing its various potentialities toward self-actualization and fulfillment, but rather expands artificially by accruing the detritus of lived experience. If this is in fact the case, and yet we operate on an ideology of ever-increasing social, physical, and moral autonomy, then it's clear that that ideology is a cultural construction, rather than a natural inclination or potentiality, revealing that our core beliefs are also dependent on contingent cultural narratives.

Postmodernism, as it relates to theories of the self, calls into question all those narratives, all the big stories of how we live or how we should live and manage our relationships.

Postmodern art, then, also calls into question cherished narratives, notions of organic form, and the autonomy of the artistic process by being overtly irreverent and self-referential. A postmodern picturebook might parody a narrative or an artistic form, or it might present a local version of a “universal” (read white, European) story, such as the myriad culturally specific versions of Little Red Riding Hood or Cinderella. They may poke fun at cultural sacred cows such as “happily ever after” endings, or challenge the softness and stylized beauty of organic forms with impossibly angular or distorted images and caricatures. They call attention to and celebrate their artistic processes rather than their subjects, or their processes as integral to their subjects, as does Lauren Child in her end note to The Princess and the Pea, which describes in detail how she selected and cut out her miniature scenes, and how they were photographed. In fact, would go so far as to say that the project of well-made postmodern picture books is to reveal their constructedness, and to make their materiality the matically relevant, that is, to embody the principles that inspired Marshal McLuhan to pronounce that “the medium is the message.” Dave McKean for instance, in his illustrations for Neil Gaiman's The Wolves in the Walls melds the organic, the inorganic, and the digital into a masterful visual expression of the book’s textual themes. The cover shows Lucy, the main character, drawing a picture of a wolf. She isn’t looking at her picture, however, and thus doesn’t seem to notice that the eyes of her picture have been cut out, and real red wolf eyes are peering out from the holes. The stair wall of her house is covered with pictures she has drawn of wolves, forcing the reader to realize that the wolves coming out of the walls and taking over the house are Lucy’s creations rather than some interlopers from outside. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the wolves are drawn in pen and ink, unlike the characters, who, though digital, have a dimensional solidity. Thus McKean indicates through his use of artistic technique the thematic message that while these predators are insubstantial and come from within they are no less alien and scary because of that.

What postmodern picturebooks do not do, however, is present the postmodern critique in its nihilistic or even its angst-y guise. Rather than present the bleak portrait that our once cherished moral compasses no longer
point true, that our sense of autonomy has been grounded on a facile and dangerous illusion, and that we are doomed to a hopelessly incoherent fragmentation of our selves into artificial social roles, the face of postmodernism that gets presented to children in picturebooks is its hopeful, ludic one, as Maria Nikolajeva points out in her essay. If the project of postmodern books is to reveal their own processes, the goal of the revelation is empowerment for the reader; they deliver a strong invitation and even an expectation that readers will participate in meaning making. McCauley’s illustrations of Lucy and her family’s predicament, for instance, don’t just inspire wonder at their virtuosity; they inspire analysis: What’s real and what’s not? How did he create that effect? Could I do that? These questions then lead, consciously or unconsciously, to a reflection on the nature of what is real, and how we might participate in its construction. Postmodern picturebooks may explode cultural myths and reveal the constructedness of reality and identity, but they do so in the name of freedom, to release readers from the thrall of powerful, controlling narratives that threaten to circumscribe their potential. As multiple authors in this volume show, postmodern picturebooks demonstrate a faith in their readers’ ability to meet their challenges. Rather than viewing children as blank slates ready to receive and mimic an authoritative word, or as developmentally unready for sophisticated jokes and parodies that reveal the instability of narrative, postmodern picturebook authors and illustrators expect their readers to bring something to the table and be willing to engage in a playful reconsideration of what they know and believe about the world. They expect a large degree of openness, flexibility, and even knowingness in their audience, reflecting a more positive vision of the self than is usually theorized in postmodern theory. Indeed, I would argue that their vision is not generally postmodern at all, but transmodern.

The self in postmodernity has been variously formulated by theorists in the humanities and social sciences. Social psychologist Kenneth Gergen, for instance, posits a “saturated” self, a self characterized by polyvalency, plasticity, and transience. Bombarded by voices and images from a ubiquitous media, the self emerges as a pastiche without a coherent center. Psychologist Philip Cushman (whose connection to children’s literature is, irrelevantly, that he is author Karen Cushman’s husband) describes the self in postmodernity as empty. Whereas the traditional self emerged from relatively stable community life, the conditions of contemporary social life for many people have destabilized this trace, so that we are now more likely to define ourselves by identifying with more socially recognizable brands. We’re Toys “R” Us kids (or we wanna be), members of the Lexus family, Disney Princesses, PCPeople, or AOL Subscribers (Only!). Indeed if the postmodern self does appear anywhere as a category, it is that of consumer, “the bourgeoisie triumphant and enjoying itself” (Jencks 17), which obviously doesn’t begin to offer a complete picture of the child self in contemporary culture.

However, it does bring us back around to the importance of representation in children’s culture. If we take postmodern critiques seriously, we begin to see the self as, at least in part, an iteration rather than an expression of some internal originality. Indeed, if the self could be said to have a single structural invariant over time and across cultures, it is that it is mimetic; children learn how to be in the world through watching and imitating others, and by striving to embody those representations that seem to have cultural value. What will happen, then, if the stories that saturate children’s subjectivities change—if, for instance, instead of narratives emphasizing growth, coherence, autonomy, and development, they find themselves set to sea in a sieve of narratives that privilege randomness, relativity, polyvalency, fragmentation, and contingency? If postmodern critiques of the self as an empty void ripe for cultural construction and deconstruction are valid, then we might be in serious cultural trouble. But just as postmodernism set limits on the optimism of modernism, a theory of the transmodern can set limits on postmodernism’s potential nihilism.

**TRANSMODERNISM AND THE BODY**

The notion of transmodernity emerges as an attempt to flesh out a more complete picture of who we are now, or at least what we currently believe about ourselves. While it accepts the limits of the modern that postmodernism has rightly pointed out, it seeks to form an understanding of the self that, according to Vitz, “both transforms the modern and also transcends it” (xviii). It seeks to keep the best and most persistent impulses of modernity—the striving for meaning beyond the self, the desire for coherence, the push for freedom—while acknowledging that real limits are imposed on individuals by their bodies, their relationships, their culture, and their language. The three basic tenets that transmodernism takes as its articles of faith regarding the self are as follows: (a) the self is embodied, (b) the self is born into a community, and (c) the self uses language and other semiotic systems to make and communicate meaning. Cultural values vary widely within these parameters, but simply acknowledging their facticity is something that both modernity and postmodernism have been reluctant to do for various reasons, and opens up considerable possibilities for understanding the interface between the images and narratives of children’s literature and the development of the self. In both modern and postmodern accounts of the self, for instance, the body is lost—either as an unnecessary hindrance to the concept of a disembodied individual rationality in the former, or as an infinitely plastic substance that is inconsequential to virtual reality in the latter. The transmodern brings the body back into the mix as both limit and as an invariant centering principle around which a child’s sense of self circulates.
Take Janell Cannon's *Stellaluna*, for instance. As a bat reared by birds, she is keenly aware of the limits her body imposes on her sense of self. Although she can make compromises—eat bugs instead of fruit, sleep at night instead of during the day, hang by her thumbs instead of her feet, she is not inherently plastic as a postmodern theory of cultural constructionism might imply. Thrilled that she can fly like her bird siblings, she finds that trying to land like a bird just doesn't work for a bat body; it is awkward and embarrassing. However, on the other hand, her body is not as limited as the narrative Mama Bird has imposed on her would imply. She has accepted that she cannot see at night, and that she must not hang by her feet. Even though these cultural rules do not accord with the affordances of her own body, she internalizes them to the extent that she really believes that she can't see at night. When she reunites with her bat family, she rediscovers the core embodied self she has lost—she relearns to fly at night, she begins to eat food proper to her species, and she learns that Mama Bird’s rightside up is her upside down. The lesson to be learned here is not some regression into an essentialism that admonishes children to stick with their own kind. It is, instead, a celebration of the transmodern body, a body that is adaptable but also sets limits, and if those limits are honored through testing, stretching, and finally, embracing, there can be more joy all around, as she and her bird siblings discover.

*Tadpole's Promise*, by Jeanne Willis, is another text that takes us through a postmodern critique to a transmodern finish. A tadpole falls in love with a caterpillar, and, in naïve romantic fashion, they promise each other that they will never change. A postmodern reading of this book leads us to cynicism: Love, especially between stupid, stubborn people, is a fruitless exercise that ends badly. Even forgiveness is not rewarded, as (spoiler alert!) the transformed caterpillar decides she can forgive her lover for changing, only to be eaten by him before she can get the words out. But the necessity of change, particularly at the level of the body, is a biological inevitability impervious to the protestation of undying love. Usually, of course, we see this ideology in reverse: The romantic notion of undying love being impervious to changes in the body—sickness and health and whatnot—constitutes a grand narrative whose frequent social failures have proved the validity of its postmodern critique. But if we start with the transmodern acknowledgement that the body is the centering principle of the self, then we can see a new narrative emerging, a narrative that accepts change as its source of constancy. While we laugh at the unreasonable demand for the coherence of an ideal that actively denies the body, we unconsciously take in a narrative that material, physical change is inevitable, and if we don't accept and expect it, we may end up as someone's tasty snack.

Of course, we might end up there anyway, at least in postmodern picturebooks. Chris Raschka's *Arlene Sardine* is a controversial little book that opens itself to many interpretations. It is a parody of a hero’s quest, the tale of a little brisling that could, as it were, if one accepts that achieving one's ultimate destiny can in fact mean ending up on someone's plate as a smoked, canned (but happy) sardine. Unlike more modernist heroes, such as Dick King-Smith's Babe and E. B. White's Wilbur, Arlene embraces her body's destiny with relish (or mustard as the case may be). Admittedly, the ideology conveyed in Arlene's story is less optimistic considered from any perspective—modernist, postmodernist, or transmodernist—but Raschka’s lightly poetic touch announces what it's doing. Traditions are being called to account here—a literary tradition of sentimental Romantic poetry dedicated to dead children, a cultural tradition of losing oneself in the service of something larger, and even those modernist transcend-your-biological-destiny narratives mentioned are being challenged. If we read it straight, then Arlene is happy with her choice; read slant, a playful irony emerges. Both *Arlene Sardine* and *Tadpole’s Promise* offer ironic articulations of the failures of Romantic and modernist constructions of the self, opportunities to laugh at one's own pretensions to heroism and changeless love, as well as to rethink the possibilities and limitations of one's embodiment.

**TRANSMODERNISM AND COMMUNITY**

In their emphasis on autonomy and independence, both the Romantic and the modernist self largely ignore the necessity of community in the formation of the self. Often, as we noted above, characters in modernist texts are happy isolates, and community, if portrayed at all, is depicted as a space of threat and violation. In many modernist texts, one finds support in a community only as its leader; consider, for instance, *Babar the King, Madeleine*, and *Where the Wild Things Are*. But social reality makes the idea of the isolate ridiculous on its face. We are dependent on others for our very bodies, our language, our sustenance, and not everyone can be a leader. Moreover, our problems affect others, and often require the help of others to solve them. Thus, *The Wolves in the Walls* becomes a transmodern revision of *Where the Wild Things Are*. Lucy's wolves are close cousins to Max's wild things, as evidenced by McKeen's intertextual reference to Sendak's picture of one of Max's wild things on the stair wall, but they are not just her problem to face and solve. The entire family is chased from the house when the wolves come out of the walls, and they must fight together to expel the wolves from their home. Just as *Stellaluna* needed her bird family in order to survive and thrive after the loss of her mother, characters in postmodern picturebooks are often embedded in communities, or experience the lack of community as a problem to be solved.

Karen LaReau's *Ugly Fish* offers a trenchant and very funny critique of the autonomous individual who disdains community. Ugly Fish is very content as the only fish in his tank. He enjoys his driftwood tunnel and his special briny flakes. When a new fish swims into his world, Ugly Fish insists that there is only room for him in his tank, and he chases and eats each new tankmate. Eventually, he regrets his hasty tastes, and longs for a friend with which to
share his driftwood tunnel and his special briny flakes. Shiny Fish, however, is of the same autonomous bent as Ugly Fish, and Ugly Fish is soon dispatched. Once again, we have a main character who ends up being eaten because of a modernist denial of social reality that transmodernity affirms—you gotta have friends.

The Big Ugly Monster and the Little Stone Rabbit, by Chris Wormell, is a more poignant, but no less trenchant, critique of modernist denial, this time of both social reality and the necessities of embodiment. The modernist narrative that this story unmasks and critiques is the one that suggests that love and acceptance in the right community can change ugly people into beautiful people. Doesn’t happen here, just as it doesn’t happen in John Scieszka’s version of the “Ugly Duckling” in The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales. The monster in this tale is so ugly that all living things around him flee or die, blue skies turn gray at his glance, and ponds dry up at his touch. Inside, though, he is sad and lonely, and so one would expect, from our intertextual experiences with both modernist texts and children’s literature generally, that he will be rewarded for his inner beauty with a steadfast friend who will change his circumstances. And he is, sort of. He carves a bunch of animals out of stone to act as his companions, but when he smiles all of them shatter except one. His friendship with the hardy little stone rabbit doesn’t make him any less ugly, nor does his love for her awaken her from the rock. Her presence does, however, make him happier and less lonely, and the fact that the flowers reappear around his cave the day he dies, turning it into “perhaps the most beautiful place in the whole world” (n.p.) suggests that their friendship was the beauty before the more conventional beauty rushed in to take its place. The humor here is limned with sadness, and the resistance of the text to discerning any ultimate message requires a reader to sort it out for herself, though it is clear that companionship of some sort is necessary for a happy life.

In this book, then, as in Stellaluna and Tadpole’s Promise, we see characters attempting to transcend their own boundaries, to reach out to others, and to develop community despite their limitations. Grand narratives are shattered with humor through irony, rather than sarcasm or cynicism, allowing children the possibility of seeing through their own illusions without utterly shattering them; that is, just because I know that something is a fiction, doesn’t mean it can’t be a useful fiction to get me past a bad time or teach me something important about how to live. The trick is to know which stories are useful and which are unnecessarily restrictive, which to keep and which to reject.

**TRANSMODERNISM AND SEMIOTIC SYSTEMS**

As these texts have shown, a theory of the transmodern offers us not only a way to reposition the body as the invariant center that guarantees the self’s coherence, but also calls us to consider the body in relationship to others, and the relative usefulness of cultural narratives. In the above examples we see relationships of family, partners, and friendship. The transmodern also acknowledges the embeddedness of the self in larger cultural systems. Unlike the modern, which insists on the self’s autonomy from these systems, or the postmodern, which at once challenges the coherence of cultural narratives and insists that we are constructed by them, the transmodern acknowledges the both/and of these positions. One of the ways in which it does this is through recognizing the complexity and materiality of language and other sign systems as central to an understanding of the self. Insofar as both modernism and postmodernism recognize the centrality of language and image to the construction of the self, this tenet of transmodernism is not as severely neglected as the other two. What I want to emphasize here are the correctives a theory of the transmodern can make to both modernist and postmodernist interpretations of the problem of representation through language and image. While modernist writers and poets like Eliot, Pound, H.D., and Stevens struggled to say something new by dislocating meaning from its usual contexts and referents, and modernist artists eschewed reference of any kind, they still sought a meaningful existence through depth and self-reflection, and despaired at times of ever achieving it. Postmodernists, by contrast, saw the same problems, but abandoned the quest for a transcendent meaning. Instead, they claimed the self-reflexive pose as the source of meaning, rather than as a methodology for finding it.

As I noted earlier, children’s picturebooks, modern or postmodern, aren’t angst-y, partially because children are viewed as not yet “finished,” so there is no reason yet to despair over what they have become. But more importantly, I think the reason why children’s books aren’t consumed with existential doubt or wholly given over to play and fragmentation is because we aren’t yet ready to assent fully to the claims of postmodernism. That is, we aren’t yet ready to give up on transcendence and make the fragmented, empty, saturated self the measure of all things. At the same time, however, we have lost faith in the self as inherently cohesive. The transmodern offers us a vision of the self as a constructed coherence, self-aware and self-reflexive, but also culturally indebted and embedded and fully embodied. This, then, is authenticity for the self—not some inner pressure that drives us to become something we have been preprogrammed to be, but a thoughtful and critical responsiveness to our histories, our social stories, and our bodies. And I would contend that no other artistic product gives us a clearer picture of this self than the stunning collage art of contemporary picturebook artists.

Collage art in general renders the subject of picturebooks postmodern by revealing the conditions of its construction. Bits of cut paper and found materials make no pretense to autonomy; they were always already something else before they were selected, cut, shaped, and glued to make this new thing. Hence collage art is an apt metaphor for the postmodern vision...
Postmodern Picturebooks and the Transmodern Self

of the self—as something composed of experience and environment, rather than something organic and integral to itself. However, the collage art of Eric Carle, David Wisniewski, and Steve Jenkins, for instance, works differently than the collage art of artists like Lauren Childs, Shelley Jackson, Christopher Myers, David Diaz, and Brian Collier. Whereas Jenkins, Wisniewski, and Carle create pictures from cut paper, their concern is mostly to create forms, colors, and textures that suggest the things they are trying to represent, albeit in a fanciful way; they even create and dye papers to achieve the effects they want. By contrast, Childs, Jackson, Myers, Diaz, and Collier select their materials thematically. They use textiles and materials that surround children in their everyday lives, and put them to new uses to create pictures that are more than the sum of their parts. In so doing, they call attention to the materiality of their subjects, to the ways that our worlds are composed by an overlap of found objects, everyday experiences, and trace memories. David Diaz's collages in *Smoky Night*, for instance, are composed of the objects that would be found in the looted stores and on the streets during the very scary L.A. riots, and yet their very familiarity renders them comforting, as do the firm borders that contain the scenes of chaos that he creates. His painted characters are representations of emotional states as much as human and animal forms, but by composing the figures as separate from and still embedded within their environment through the use of a different yet complementary artistic technique, he emphasizes their bodily integrity in the midst of uncertainty and fear.

Christopher Myers, Shelley Jackson, and Brian Collier also tend to paint their figures, using collage for their landscapes and backgrounds, but occasionally integrating found materials into their painted figures through their clothing, hair, etc. These artistic techniques expose the seams and edges where our identities come together, dispelling forever the notion that we are who we are because we just naturally grew that way, independent of our circumstances. More importantly, they show quite literally how these bits and pieces are not merely disconnected fragments, but how they come together to form something coherent and beautiful.

I want to close, then, with a description of an image that forms for me the quintessential expression of the transmodern vision. The image is found in Doreen Rappaport and Brian Collier's award-winning book, *Martin's Big Words*. The entire book is a miracle of design, from the irony of its wordless cover to the moving portraits of the civil rights leader, surrounded by symbols of his ideology and struggle, throughout his life. The image I want to focus on, however, is of a young black girl wrapped in a flour-sack dress, posed before an American flag. True to the postmodern critique of a narrative of freedom and equality in America that has been racialized through exclusion from its inception, the flag as Collier depicts it is riven and tattered. And yet it is strangely coherent as well; it appears as though it has been torn to bits and then reassembled, using bits of yellow, green, and orange—the traditional colors of the flags of many African nations—as patches and overlays to fill in gaps. The girl child at its center is painted, suggesting the integrity of her embodiment, but she too has overlays of ragged textiles to signify her poverty, and of flag stripes that turn to yellow and green as they cross her face, suggesting the sources and scars of her oppression. Her arms disappear behind the flag, but she holds them open, suggesting both vulnerability and the possibility of embrace, and yet her expression is one of seriousness and defiant challenge. In this single image, Collier manages to capture the essence of transmodern identity—its hybrid, pastiche, assembled quality, its indebtedness to history and social systems, its material embodiment, and its challenge to reach beyond itself to find meaning and fulfillment.

NOTES


2. The word transmodern was coined by Paul C. Vitz, and the theory that I am presenting here was worked out collaboratively during a Calvin College Seminar in Christian Scholarship entitled "Loss of the Self in a Postmodern Therapeutic Culture," sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts in the summer of 2001. Papers developed as a result of that seminar that explore the topic in multiple ways from various disciplinary perspectives are collected in a volume called *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis*, edited by Paul C. Vitz and Susan M. Felch (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).

WORKS CITED


CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CITED


6 “They are Always Surprised at What People Throw Away”
Glocal Postmodernism in Australian Picturebooks

John Stephens

Postmodernism is an elusive term that may loosely refer to numerous types of cultural practices, including literature, film, architecture, market commodities, and ways of living everyday life. Although it is an international phenomenon, it is not a global monolith, and is apt to have glocal manifestations. The purpose of this chapter is to examine a selection of key Australian picturebooks which in some sense can be described as postmodern, in order to determine whether the dialogue between internationalism and local concerns has produced a glocal version of postmodernism, what may be termed a postmodern hybridization. According to Wayne Gabardi, glocalization is characterized by the development of diverse, overlapping fields of global-local linkages:

This condition of glocalization ... represents a shift from a more territorialized learning process bound up with the nation-state society to one more fluid and translocal. Culture has become a much more mobile, human software employed to mix elements from diverse contexts. (33)

Because they address young readers still largely bounded by the domestic sphere, picturebooks are usually geographically and institutionally embedded. This embeddedness may be weakened in the case of postmodern picturebooks both because they engage with polymorphous cultural forms and because they address an older audience. Although in Australia, as elsewhere, the category of postmodern picturebooks is small, it is one of the sites upon which postmodernism has impacted in the context of complex and conflicting social and political conditions. As Margaret Henderson observes, postmodernism in Australia is often perceived as a foreign import, a bundle of knowledges “basically anti-humanist in orientation, such as structuralism, French-influenced feminism(s), poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and certain strands of French philosophy, for example that of Deleuze or Lyotard” (51). Australian postmodernist picturebooks were a comparable global import, first emerging some fifteen years after the distinctive postmodern